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SOME INTERPRETATIONS OF MILTON

After a recent study of Milton's minor poems I find myself questioning the accepted interpretations of certain notable passages.

Ruskin's injunction (*Sesame and Lilies*), to watch every accent and expression, put ourselves always in the author's place, annihilate our own personality and seek to enter his, "so as to be able assuredly to say 'Thus Milton thought' not 'Thus I thought in mis-reading Milton'" is most apt and necessary. And yet I suspect that Ruskin violates his own rule in dealing with the very passage that seems to have induced its formulation, as well as elsewhere.

I believe he misses the mark in his treatment of the expression "Blind mouths" (*Lycidas* 110). "These two monosyllables," he says, "express the precisely accurate contraries of right character in the two great offices of the Church—those of bishop and pastor. A 'Bishop' means 'a person who sees.' A 'Pastor' means 'a person who feeds.' The most unbishoply character a man can have is therefore to be Blind. The most unpastoral is, instead of feeding, to want to be fed—to be a Mouth. Take the two reverses together, and you have 'blind mouths.'" According to this the designation *as a whole* does not apply to either bishop or pastor—to any one, to any class. We must divide the adjective from its noun, and, however awkward, apply them separately. Fortunately such a procedure is neither reasonable nor necessary.

It would be eminently like Milton to use an original of the phrase found in an ancient author and we have it precisely in the geographer Strabo, 183, who applies the term *τυφλός-τομος* to the mouth of a river choked with mud or sand. If this be the origin of the phrase, the idea of greediness read into it by Ruskin and his successors must be abandoned. The notion of shallowness, of impeded utterance, of lack of spontaneity governs the meaning, which looks forward rather than backward in the passage for its relationship.

2. The second misinterpretation, as prevalent as the first, is of the lines in *Comus* (93, 94):

The star that bids the shepherd fold
Now the top of heaven doth hold.

All the editions to which I have access say, "the evening star," or more specifically "Venus," or "Hesperus." The patent objection is that the evening star (or planet) does not at folding time appear at "the top of heaven," a specification which cannot be so easily dismissed as many assume. Does not an exacter explanation fit this passage better? In May, the critical month for flocks, the constellation *Leo* is in the zenith shortly after sunset, while Aries

(is this significant?) is sinking in the west. As the lion, according to Homer (*Il.* x, 485, and often), is the great menace to flocks, the appearance of the constellation is a warning to shepherds. It is much more than the hand on a dial; it is a celestial reminder of a deadly peril to innocence that lurks in the darkness.

3. The third widely accepted error that I wish to notice is in line 53 *On the Death of a Fair Infant*. Recent editions print it thus:

Or wert thou [Mercy] that sweet smiling youth?

The bracketed word was "suggested in 1750 by John Heskin to fill the obvious lacuna." Masson says, "There can be no doubt that Mercy was meant." Notwithstanding this high authority I am not convinced. It is true that Mercy is throned between Justice and Truth in *The Hymn on the Nativity*, ll. 141-146, but here are three separate or alternate characters who need not all be the same as where they constitute one picture. "Smiling" is scarcely a fit epithet of Mercy, or the masculine "youth" a fit appositive. The infant's sex does not forbid a comparison to "young Hyacinth" (4th stanza).

Leaving negations, may I suggest that Milton had in mind the boy Ganymede, who on account of his beauty was snatched from earth by Jove's eagle to succeed Hebe (Youth) as the cup-bearer of the Olympians (*Hom. Il.* xx, 232), and whose name (*γάμος μέδομαι*) signifies Joy or Gladness? Such a reference would be exceedingly obvious, Miltonic, and in harmony with the mention of Aquilo, l. 8. The lacuna was probably not an accident but resulted either from the difficulty of finding an exact equivalent of Ganymede that would satisfy the metre and the ear, or from a purpose by the omission to emphasize the second alternative.

4. *Lycidas*, ll. 30, 31. *Oft till the star*, etc. Under the accepted interpretation "*any* star that so rose" will do. But Milton's known exactness is not satisfied with so easy an explanation that neglects the "westering wheel" as a mark of identification. To conceive of any star, a mere point of light, as a wheel would strain imagination, especially when such a conception is unnecessary. The words, I think, point to Arcturus, the brightest star in the constellation Bootes, the Waggoner, driver of the Wain (*Ursa Major*) (*Homer, Il.*, xviii, 487-9, and *Milton, Eleg. Quinta*, 35, 36). In the latitude of London the Wain does not set, but on the margin of the sky the wheel farther from the pole, sweeping around westward, seems down a slope from the wheel nearer the pole. "Westering," therefore, does not mean "passing to the west," as lexicographers instruct us, but *circling the west*. This way of marking time in the night is one of extreme Arcadian simplicity and coincides with that in *Il Penseroso*, l. 87.

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